

Racial violence and COVID-19

A brief reflection on the coloniality of power in pandemic times

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Since COVID-19 emerged, Western discourse vivifies the exclusion and objectification of racial groups regarding both a responsible subject and potential solutions to the pandemic. These solutions articulate political interests instead of addressing the common interests and needs of the entire international population. Western discourse during the pandemic particularly affects the African continent and phenotypically Asian people. It is expression of the still prevailing coloniality of the international structure of power and dominance.

According to the *coloniality of power* concept, economic, political, epistemological and social dominance remains tied to the structures initially established during the colonial period. Western societies consider Western civilization modern, whilst societies originating from different civilizations are portrayed as pre-modern with reference to an alleged backwardness of [pre-colonial times](#). Through this psychological and social intersubjective mechanism, society is organized in a way which absorbed colonial thinking even after the end of colonialism as a political form of direct domination. Therefore, its analytical and epistemic concepts remain valid [today](#).

[Racial categories](#) as they are currently used were created specifically in order to distinguish Global South people from Christian and white Europeans and attest the latter's superiority. As a result, racialized people were [forcibly attributed biological characteristics](#) connected to their ethnic and racial origins. These characteristics formed different stereotypes, which were meant to attest their inferiority. It seemed useful and self-serving for the global powers to objectify other human beings, presenting them as barbaric and therefore subservient.

These racialized stereotypes prevail today and are reinforced amidst the current international crisis. The prejudice towards as well as the exclusion and persecution of phenotypically Asian people [emerged](#) after Western countries' leaders [attributed the virus to alleged cultural Chinese practices](#), even calling it the China Virus. African stigmatization received attention from social media comments by footballers [Didier Drogba](#) and [Samuel Eto'o](#). The players drove the world's attention to doctor [Jean-Paul Mira's insinuation that the African continent should be used as a place for vaccine trials](#).

These circumstances illustrate the subjugation status persisting between the Global South the European and American powers.

Africa and scientific racism

It is important to stress the role of the natural sciences in establishing European centered theories that endorsed the creation of racial/ethnic dominance as cultural elements. [Scientific racism](#) persisted for years in an attempt of scientists to prove the biological differences between races as determined by Western powers. Furthermore, the literal use of African countries and its nationals for experimental trials remained a common practice of Western countries until less than a century ago. [During the entire neocolonial period](#), European colonizers used African goods and individuals for medical, sociological or anthropological experiments among others. Even disregarding the medical risks of such trials, their restriction to a particular geographical and ethnic region endorses the sociological and cultural view of its individuals as inhumane. The conduct of medical experiments on African trial subjects is a historical practice stemming from colonial ideologies. It objectifies the African population and suggests the continent should be used as the world's laboratory.

Jean-Paul Mira's proposal to use Africa as a place for vaccine trials illustrates how the contemporary situation is rooted in colonial structures. The doctor, head of the intensive care unit at Cochin hospital in Paris, is a respected figure in the medical community. The fact that someone like him speaks of African citizens as second-class humans on TV demonstrates the power structure prevailing since colonial times.

[Mira justified his comments](#) with the notion of Western humanitarian action and Africa as a continent in need, which might be worse still. Commonly known as the "[white savior complex](#)", his reaction promotes a homogenization of African individuals' interests, reaffirming racial and geographical subjugation in line with the Lacanian concept of [infantilization](#). This concept describes the appropriation of a subject's authority over its narrative, rejecting direct dialogue, as is often done when adults address children in the third person. Similarly, Doctor Mira downplays African peoples' humanity and submits their interests to Western attitudes and goals, disregarding their autonomy and will. It disregards the fact that the African continent is formed by fifty-four states, each one a collection of different cultural identities, ethnicities, and economies. The French doctor, along with Western forces, neglects the colonial roots of the contemporary world's structures.

China, Asia and the virus

The formation of Asian exploitation and stereotypes follows an intellectual colonial process, especially when it comes to China. The "far East" portrayal emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries, when European academics evaluated Chinese society as [immutable and stuck in the past](#). Western thinkers established the notion of [Yellow Peril](#), depicting Asians as "[inferior and barbarous, narrow-minded and xenophobic](#)", thus declaring them a threat to the West.

This negative Asian stereotype not only remained but worsened throughout the 20th century. Especially during the 1929 financial crisis, the deplorable situation of common workers in Europe and the USA was blamed on Asian immigrants. They served as scapegoats for American politicians and the media, who accused

them of taking away jobs from the *true American*. Henceforth, phenotypically Asian individuals [started to be harassed](#) within Western countries.

As a consequence of the violence based on race and ethnicity Asian groups were geographically excluded from society towards ghettos, the so-called *Chinatowns*. Due to the lack of social integration, which enhanced social differentiation and poor sanitary conditions, they became known as [dirty](#), and their food as *exotic* and *weird*. This stereotype still prevails and has been reinforced with the COVID-19 crisis, which only worsened this cultural violence. Similarly to past pandemics, the origin of COVID was internationally attributed to the alleged “dirtiness” and “exoticism” of the artificially homogenized Chinese culture, in [specific reference to the existence of wet markets in the region](#).

Wet markets are central elements of food commercialization and consumption in Asia. They are spread in several countries around the continent and specialize in fresh products. In fact, they [do not differ much](#) from European or Brazilian open markets both in their characteristics and social function. However, these similarities are [questioned by Western observers](#). They usually claim that Chinese commercialization of living organisms is an issue due to sanitary or moral reasons. However, this claim first ignores the [existent commercialization of living animals – cows, hens, goats – in any European countryside](#) for consumption or procreation as well as Western fish markets. Secondly, the stigmatization of Global Southern culture rests on the European standards for what is normal and what is exotic. Accordingly, Europe’s food and traditions are considered normal, while Global South cultures tend to be homogenized as exotic, weird, different.

[Food is a social expression](#), and a common metonymy for an entire culture. By labeling Asian food as exotic, gross or weird, European culture is reaffirmed as the standard culture, discrediting the preservation and expression of other cultures.

Conclusion

The portrayed scenarios are only a small sample of how Western discourse in the crisis reveals the roles colonial structures still play in maintaining power both through racial and geographical differentiation. Nonetheless, they play a significant part in enhancing stereotypes created in the past and in strengthening Western epistemological perspectives.

The current COVID-19 pandemic reinforces the international structure of power not only in economic terms, but also socially and culturally. It reveals the impunity Western powers enjoy despite objectifying individuals and excluding racialized voices and how this continues to be widely tolerated by their citizens worldwide. Similarly to other social phenomena, it demonstrates how, attempts at resistance notwithstanding, colonial powers succeeded in dominating colonized peoples.

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